Policy Sci (2015) 48:127–133
DOI 10.1007/s11077-015-9214-0

DISCUSSION AND COMMENTARY

"Get those voices at the table!": Interview with Deborah Stone

Mark van Ostaijen · Shivant Jhagroe

Published online: 24 February 2015

Introduction

Deborah Stone's work on political reasoning, storytelling and metaphors has been a longstanding contribution to the development of public administration, political and policy sciences. In her book *Policy Paradox and Political Reason* published in 1988, she focuses on policy and politics as cultural bargaining over values and ideas, instead of a rational process of decision-making. In addition to this book, which was retitled *Policy Paradox, The Art of Political Decision Making* in later editions, she has published widely on societal paradoxes, political reasoning and professional dilemmas in many aspects of social policy. The newest edition (published in 2012 and called the third edition, but really the fourth) incorporates major revisions to the literature, theories and policy illustrations, including more examples from international relations and countries besides the USA.

Due to this key contribution and the longstanding relevance of her book, we talked with Deborah Stone in Vienna on 5 July 2013. We had a dialogue about this book, her theoretical ideas and how policy sciences could improve in the future.

Deborah Stone affiliation details: Lecturer in Public Policy, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, M.I.T. (Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

M. van Ostaijen (✉) · S. Jhagroe
Department of Public Administration, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Room T17-53, Burgemeester Oudlaan 50, 3062 PA Rotterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: vanostaijen@fsw.eur.nl

S. Jhagroe
e-mail: jhagroe@fsw.eur.nl

Academic work: Policy Paradox

Q: How did you initially came up with the ideas behind the book "Policy Paradox"?

DS: I got my first job at the Institute of Policy Sciences at Duke University in North Carolina. The Institute was part of a new movement to make government and public administration into a science. Its founders came up with this phrase "Policy Sciences" to convey the goal of applying scientific knowledge to government and improving government output in that way. They thought of policy very mechanistically as inputs and outputs. They weren't sure how to define this new field, but they knew it needed to be interdisciplinary, so they hired two economists, one statistical person, one decision theorist, two psychologists, one specialist on ethics, one historian and one political scientist (me). When I was in graduate school, there was not yet a field of public policy, not even a single course on it. So within this institute, I was scratching my head, asking myself: "Okay what is public policy and how am I supposed to teach it?"

The basic approach of my colleagues was that policy analysis was—or should be—a purely rational endeavour. From what I had studied in political science and sociology, I knew policy wasn't so rational. Right away I encountered the problem that I was teaching stuff that I, and my students, didn't grasp very well. Students were learning in the other courses that there are right answers, and with the right technical tools, they could find them. But I knew that this isn't the way policy is made. So, I was trying to teach my students all this messy stuff, and my courses gave them a more messy picture of the world, more like a Jackson Pollock abstract expressionist painting than a realist one that purports to show the exact truth. My students appreciated my more human, sociological approach, but they were confused: "What are we supposed to get from this? How does this help us to achieve better policies?" They were told that they were training for government jobs, that they would become policy analysts and help higher-up authorities to make better decisions.

I didn't get great teaching evaluations in my first couple of years, in large part because I wasn't providing students with clear analytic formulas they could put to use. Therefore, I needed to re-imagine what I had learned about politics as conceptual lenses and analytic tools. If I could help my students see these ideas as constructive tools that they could use to get a better understanding of a problem, that would give them (and me!) the sense of being competent and constructive.

Q: How did you do that?

DS: Here's one example: I knew that values are extremely important in policy debates, and that people argue about the meaning of, say, equality or freedom. So, let's take equality. How can I make this complex idea really concrete to show that people can have different images of equality? Each image makes perfect sense, but only inside their own framework. I came across an article by Douglas Rae that used the example of dividing a chocolate cake "equally". I tried assigning it, but students had a hard time understanding it, and so did I, frankly. In the process of explaining it, I developed my own concepts and terms, and I worked hard to make sure each theoretical concept (a "dimension" of equality in my terms) had a clear illustration in the cake problem. Then I forced myself to do the same exercise using different policy examples of distributing something more complex than cake.

Eventually, when I began writing the book, I tried to do that for every other concept. For each of the value chapters (liberty, efficiency, welfare and security), I've tried to find more

of these concrete analogies to show how different interpretations of these core values can be exemplified. In the other chapters, such as stories, numbers, interests, incentives and rules, I re-imagined the literature about these issues, trying to see them as social constructions of conflict that one could study systematically.

Q: Your first book was published in 1988, while the latest edition came out in 2012. Could you reflect on the development of your initial ideas? What kind of insights throughout time occurred in relation to advances in policy sciences?

DS: The 2012 edition was a wholesale revision. In my two previous revisions (1997 and 2002), I had updated some policy examples and added a case study about affirmative action in higher education in the US, but I had not engaged the new theoretical literature and the North American and European turn to neoliberalism. My colleagues who teach the book, my editor Roby Harrington, and I all agreed the book needed a major overhaul. I kept the same theoretical framework, but in every chapter, I brought in new theories and political concerns. Let me give four examples. In the chapter on Equity, I added "merit" and "loyalty" as distributive criteria, and I replaced the tired, 1980s discussion of John Rawls and Robert Nozick with newer literature on *inequality* and its impacts, globally as well as domestically. In the chapter on Efficiency, I stopped fighting the neoclassical market model quite so much and paid more attention to explaining and critiquing neoliberalism as the dominant policy paradigm. Another major change I had to address was the transformation in security studies brought about by 9/11 and the importance of terrorism. I retitled the original security chapter as "Welfare" because it was always limited to economic security, and I added a new chapter on security that deals with military and terrorist attacks and other threats to human security, such as industrial accidents like the BP oil spill or climate change. Finally, my goal in the revision was to make the whole book more international—in response to non-US students who now read the book and also of course, in response to the globalization that has intensified since I first conceived the book. So for example, instead of talking only about rights as they are conceived in US politics, I broaden the discussion to international human rights and how those conceptions have influenced domestic rights policies around the world.

Q: Do you think your book influenced current policymaking?

DS: I only wish! Sometimes I get emails from people working for the US government or governments in other countries. They say that they studied the book and that it influenced them. But nobody has told me: "We got this policy through and it is designed in the way it was because of you", and I wouldn't expect that to happen. But one of the really rewarding things about teaching at my senior stage is that you do get feedback that you influenced people.

For instance, in my book about disability, I argued that disability is not an objective medical phenomenon that can be determined by looking through a microscope or poking into somebody's body, taking X-rays and so forth, which is the dominant way of thinking about disability in social policy. Instead, I say that what disability determination is really about is social justice. One set of people thinks that another set of people deserves help. That is what all disability insurance systems are about, figuring out who deserves society's help. After my book came out and I spoke about it in many places, people working in government disability programs and advocacy groups told me, "Oh yes, you've just explained why I always feel so uncomfortable at my job". I got really positive reactions, I think, because I really gave them some validation for

using their non-rational methods and values in their decisions. Social Security Administration officials told me: "Now we understand better why what we do is so political and controversial. Politicians expect us to do objective determinations, but we can't since disability is not something objective." The Social Security Administration tried to change their training of their staffs about this and they involved me in the training, but I can't say whether I influenced actual policies.

Q: Could you indicate to what extent your work influenced fellow academics or policy sciences in general?
DS: This question is not really one for me to answer. You'll have to ask others. I can only tell you that I find it extremely gratifying when I get emails from people who are now working in government, non-profits or even business, who tell me that the book somehow helped them understand the world they are now in. It seems almost magical to me that my book could do that for people, because I don't have experience in any of those realms—I've always been in academia. So, I am really humbled and grateful that the book works for people.

Q: At the time, *Policy Paradox* confronted the field of policy sciences with some different ideas. What would at this moment be your message for policy analysts?
DS: I think the message is still the same, only now the prevailing buzzword is no longer "rationality" but "science." Policymakers and scholars call for "evidence-based" policymaking, as if analysis means finding objective evidence that yields right answers and the One Best Way. It's still the same intellectual and political struggle as far as I'm concerned.

Q: In the meantime, your book also received some critique. Policy analyst Andy Williams stated (2002) that *"(…) her approach is merely a post-modern deconstruction that emphasizes caution about our assumptions and political constructions but allows moral relativism, offering nothing in terms of establishing certain normative conceptions of the mode of operation of society, democracy and representation"*. What is your reply to this critique, criticizing your approach as moral relativism and a form of post-modern deconstruction?

DS: At the time I first wrote the book, it was very novel to say that the concept of interest groups or the concept of freedom, equality or numbers could have different interpretations. Even today, most policy analysis assumes that once you've made a count of some phenomenon and you present a percentage, say, your number is real. Scholars gloss over what is behind categorizing things that made it possible for you to come up with that number. So, I think what is sometimes disparaged as ontological relativism or postmodern constructionism is in fact a challenge to the dominant way of thinking about policy. And certainly it was a new way of seeing policy at that time. That's one explanation, I think, for why the book caught on.

Q: You take this kind of critique for granted?
DS: Yeah, I think it's fine. That's what I'm trying to show. I'm trying to question the ontological status of our analytic concepts. The other part of the critique you mentioned is about moral relativism, that my approach doesn't include a normative yardstick. Lots of philosophers want to come up with a universal standard of morality, like Kant; in fact, much of the effort in moral and ethical philosophy is to come up with a universal

standard that everybody could accept. I don't think that is possible. I'm willing to take a normative stance by calling other people wrong, and I will argue with people about it. But I don't think that I am capable of coming up with *the* correct normative position, any more than anybody else is. I really push my students to find and explore their own moral values and to exert them and to be true to themselves in the work that they do.

Q: But policymakers probably ask you for normative yardsticks.
DS: When I do my own research, I put my own normative criteria into it, no doubt. For example, my work on health policy is deeply infused with my belief that medical care ought to be distributed according the criterion of medical need—period. Not ability to pay, not social status, not anything else. But when I'm teaching, it's harder to take a strong normative stand. I don't want to impose my own values on students, yet I also hope to influence them towards generosity, kindness, respect and tolerance, for example. I also believe in democracy with a small "d"—the idea that all voices need to be heard, so get those voices at the table. There is a lot of discussion now about "deliberative democracy." Yet at some point I say, okay we can get all the voices deliberating at the table, but it is impermissible to conclude that we are going to have starving people and we aren't going to do anything to help them, even if some voices would find that acceptable. That's a normative political value judgement and that judgment influences the policy that I would push for.

Academic work: theory and ideology

Q: All kinds of new theories are popping up in political sciences and policy studies, like Critical Discourse Analysis and Actor Network Theory. What are the most interesting theories that emerge at this moment, which you didn't include in your initial phase of research?
DS: Certainly discourse analysis is becoming a vibrant field. In the late 1980's, when I first conceived the book, something similar was the field of rhetoric though it wasn't yet being applied in social science. I actually thought of calling *Policy Paradox* "The Rhetoric of Policy Argument", but it was too cold. It didn't grab you. So yes, I think discourse analysis is really interesting. New work in interpretive methods, meaning methods in which we engage with our research subjects and try to see from their points of view—that inspires me, too. In general though, I find that I am almost always impatient with theory. I read through the theoretical section of books and articles, and I can't wait to get to the concrete part, because for the most part, I think a lot of theoretical sections are so much pie-in-the-sky. The theory does not relate to reality. Sometimes if I try to dissect it, sentence by sentence, I think they are just stating common knowledge in a very pretentious way.

In fact, that's maybe one of the reasons my book has staying power. It's very grounded in the concrete. I try to state theory in plain English, and I don't say anything theoretical that I can't illustrate with a concrete example. I think a lot of new work is theory for its own sake, and people are bringing out new theories for the sake of having a new theory with their name on it, but such theories don't speak to me.

Q: The role of materiality and technology could be seen as part of political struggle and social relations. STS literature tries to move away from an overly idealist view of how politics work and move towards hybrids. How do you relate to that?

DS: Yeah, of course materiality is important: the kinds of houses people live in influences all kinds of things they do. For instance, when I teach, my PowerPoint slides are mostly visual. Last semester, when I taught a unit on the American electoral system, I started by telling my students, I want you to picture what elections *look like*. I showed photos from around the world. South Africa, Afghanistan, Iraq, people standing in a huge long line, people smiling and showing their inked fingers, et cetera. American students only know the American way of elections and take it for granted. By showing these pictures, I want to say, "Feel, taste, smell what elections are".

Q: Is there a place for ideology in your conception of politics? How do you position ideology, since it is related to normativity?
DS: We can talk about neoliberalism as one of these ideologies that is very important in politics right now. I think it is something we can study. But if you are asking, is there an ideology I subscribe to, I think there isn't, no. I subscribe to some values, and they hang together. Anybody in the US would call me left or progressive. But for teaching purposes, I'm interested in showing students how to analyse ideologies into specific values and rhetorical strategies. For example, I might ask how different ideologies interpret the idea of freedom.

Q: …and then you deconstruct it?
DS: Yes, but what is the difference between deconstructing and analysing?

Q: Deconstruction would be a way of analysing without criteria, you only have immanent criteria.
DS: I come back to this idea about formulas and right answers. The problem that I have with the notion of objective criteria external to particular contexts is that theorists in this vein try to find that one criterion that will tell us how to do the right thing. I don't believe in One Right Way or One Right Answer. The criteria we use—for example, efficiency—are themselves social constructions. That's one of the major points of the book. So ultimately, that's my deconstructionist or relativist position, yes.

Q: In an interview about your new book, *'The Samaritan Dilemma: should government help your neighbour?'*, (Stone, 2008) you mentioned the dialogue you had with your hairdresser. When you told her about your new book, she said: *"If it [the book] is about helping other people, I would like to read it, but if it's about politics, no, I don't''*. What does this tells us? Is there a story of decline about politics or democracy here?
DS: The neoliberal turn in policy in North America and Europe and that we are imposing on other countries idealizes self-sufficiency, being responsible for oneself, and limiting help and all mechanisms of social aid to only the most needy cases. That's a very selfish and stringent conception of what government is about, I think. The message of the book (and the hairdresser story) is that if indeed there is a loss of social capital and decline of public engagement, it has to do with this concept that people have a self-interested side and an altruistic side. The neoliberal framework, like the classical economic framework, emphasizes the self-interested side to the exclusion of the altruistic side. But we all have both sides. Altruism is a very important value for people, and there is a deep emotional urge to help other people. And if we can't express that through politics, we don't connect with political life. To a lot of people, at least in the US, politics is people screaming negative things at each other on television. We don't see much altruism on display on TV.

The Samaritan's Dilemma is also meant to address us as academics. I think that social sciences in general and political science in particular have become so theoretical that they don't speak to other people. If we try to tell other people what our work is about, we can't because we've been trained not to talk in everyday language.

Q: Finally, how would you *like* to see the field of policy sciences develop in the future? What could be improved from your perspective?

DS: For starters, get rid of the term "policy sciences" and perhaps use "policy studies" instead. With all due respect to this journal and its title, the term "science" inevitably connotes the positivist approach to knowledge creation. The rallying cry for "evidenced-based" policy research also partakes of this positivism. No one disputes that policy should be based on evidence, if evidence means knowledge and understanding, but what counts as evidence in this new world of evidenced-based policy is really statistics and increasingly, controlled experiments.

As is obvious from my work and what I've said so far, I think positivism is only one approach to understand the world, and for many purposes, it is limited and even distorting. For example, if you want to find out how people think and feel about something, say, in order to understand why a policy innovation isn't working as expected, survey research or contrived experiments can take you just so far. In-depth interviews, focus groups, discourse analysis, participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork could be much more revealing.

All these and more methods are often subsumed under the label "interpretive." The goal of researchers who use these methods is to find out how people "make meaning", how they interpret their own and other people's behaviour and the events that occur around them. Personally, I think the approach of interpretive policy analysis is intellectually vigorous, exciting, much better than positivism at illuminating the human experience and truly capable of *moving* people. Interpretive analysis is also a lot more fun, because you get to interact with people and to appreciate the world through literary and artistic perspectives (though I grant, some people find aesthetic pleasures in running sophisticated statistical models).

So, my overall wish for policy studies is that we teach and encourage interpretive approaches—and not just as a nice add-on to quantitative analysis so that you can say you used "mixed methods." Let's grant interpretive approaches equal citizenship in our policy schools, programs, think tanks and journals. And for interpretive policy analysis to become influential in policymaking, interpretive scholars need to curb their bent for impenetrable jargon and find ways to present their research findings in straight up everyday language as *usable, constructive suggestions*. That's the only way interpretive analysis will ever be able to compete with the simplicity of a cost-benefit ratio or a correlation coefficient.

References

Stone, D. (1988). *Policy paradox and political reason*. New York: Harper Collins.

Stone, D. (2008). *The Samaritan's Dilemma: Should government help your neighbor?*. New York: Nation Books.

Stone, D. (2012). *Policy paradox: The art of political decision making*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Williams, A. (2002). *Think a bit. Weblog*. Book Review: *Policy paradox: The art of political decision making*. http://reachandywilliams.weebly.com/stone-2002-policy-paradox.html.